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Chapter 11
Intentional Transformative Experiences and the Concept of Religious Experience

> It is said that human transformation was the only miracle the Buddha recognized as such.
> *Ralph Metzner*

Often, "transformative experiences" such as near-death experiences, awakenings, revelations, and conversions have been declared to be life-changing in the deepest sense. With new meaning found, the world and the individual do not stay the same, both by the experiencing individuals and scholars studying those experiences say. While revelatory experiences are often considered to be "passive" (as, for example, by William James in his depiction of "mystical experiences" and conversion), it is well-attested fact that in the spiritual and religious field, individuals often actively search for transformative experiences. How to harmonize these elements of intentionally *sought* and at the same time—in terms of their time, locale, and transformative quality—*unforeseeable* experiential events? How to evaluate the experiencer's account that often denies any comparability in regard to *this* specific experience?

(1) Applying cognitive metaphor theory and narratology, I will argue subsequently that (1) intentionally sought transformative experiences are paradigmatically *life-changing* in those cases in which religious life orientations as a whole change—from the non-religious, or conventionally religious to a form of full, self-conscious religiosity. New spiritual orientations imply an epistemic transformation (in the sense of Laurie A. Paul): Usually, through the transformative experience the individual will understand the finite, mortal, fragmented existence as ultimately infinite, immortal, or part of a meaningful whole. Such experiences are intentionally willed but can only be said to have been transformative after they have happened and actually changed the individual from his own, first-person point of view. They alter the view of one's own life and existence, so that one has to have the experience in order to know how one's views are changed through the experience, and how they are consolidated in the post-experiential state. In this chapter, I will aim to demonstrate,

(2) that such transformative experiences, which can be designated as spiritual or religious (to be defined below), are often *intentionally sought*, and practitioners already know what they are finally looking for—or, at least, expect

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an outcome within a certain range of possibilities. Somewhat paradoxically, though, life-changing experiences are rarely singular experiences. Usually, individuals relate that they had cognate experiences earlier in their lives, which—seen from the accomplished experience—foreshadowed and anticipated the fully transformative experiential event.

(3) I will finally argue that the central underlying epistemic object of transformative religious experience is the autobiographical self which retrospectively evaluates a process of successful transformation with almost always one central insight: that the individual no longer experiences their own existence to be finite, mortal, limited. This insight, however, that I hold to be the *religious* element of such experiences, appears to be part of various different narratives: emerging from an encounter with the "naked real," or with God, or having gained the certainty of being essentially an immortal "soul," or being pure, unbound self or egoless consciousness.

For developing the argument, I will use a somewhat eclectic collection of sources, based on sometimes more, and sometimes less-known examples of "spiritually transformed" individuals. However, I am convinced that the observations can be repeated and shown in many more, though probably not all examples of intentional transformative experiences.[1]

1 Cognitive Metaphors of Intentionally Transformative Experiences

Using the term "intentional transformative experiences" in the systematic study of religion rests on programmatic assumptions, encapsulated in each of the three terms: I am looking at *experiences*, I am searching for descriptions of *transformation*, and I am particularly interested in those transformative experiences that are *intentional*, that is, experiences explicitly searched on purpose. The central bridge that connects such special experiences with religion/s is without doubt provided by the word "transformative," which is less scholarly concept, but a concept used by the spiritually interested and the practitioners themselves. In his book *The Unfolding Self: Varieties of Transformative Experience*[2] Ralph Metzner, a

1 I am very grateful for comments by Polina Lukicheva, Laurie A. Paul, Sarah Perez, Marleen Thaler, Bastiaan van Rijn, and anonymous reviewers.

2 Metzner 1986, 1997.

psychologist and psychotherapist probably best known for his early 1960s psychedelic research at Harvard University (with Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert/Ram Dass), defines as "transformative experience" those inner processes that lead to psychospiritual growth. They do not come forth as external life-changing events such as marriage, illnesses, or births, but are "a radical restructuring of the entire psyche that has been variously referred to as mystical experience, ecstasy, cosmic consciousness, oceanic feeling, oneness, transcendence, union with God, nirvana, satori, liberation, peak experience, and by other names."[3] With the subtitle "varieties of transformative experiences," Metzner alludes to William James' famous work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.[4] He declares, as James had done a century ago, religious conversion to be a prominent form of a "transformative experience."[5] And, in the trajectory of James' approach, Metzner argues that "psycho-spiritual transformation" should be evaluated with its long-term effects, the "persistent quality of consciousness that we are expressing."[6]

To me, the most relevant aspect of Metzner's otherwise somewhat old-school collection and comparison of unusual experiences consist in his idea to approach transformative experiences by way of the metaphors used to describe them. In the world's major religious and philosophical traditions, Metzner holds, we meet only a limited number of around ten metaphors for—and of—transformative experiences.[7] Referring to cognitive metaphor theory by Lakoff and Johnson he argues that these metaphors do not only help to express such experiences. They possess a much stronger agency. Transformative experiences *and* "transformative metaphors"[8] serve as a link between ordinary and extraordinary levels, and ordinary and altered states of consciousness experienced by the individual. The metaphors themselves can be used to trigger the memory of the "deeply moving transformative experiences." They may even point to a "totally new" but already "subtly sensed dimension of experience."[9] In this way, they are equally potent as "symbols" are if conceptualized in a Jungian perspective. In sum, they help to make the unconscious visible and conscious.[10]

However, it will not be necessary to discuss all ten types of transformative experience here in depth, because a considerable number of Metzner's meta-

3 Metzner 1997, 1.
4 James 1902.
5 Metzner 1997, 10.
6 Metzner 1997, 15.
7 See already Metzner 1980.
8 Metzner 1997, 5.
9 Metzner 1997, 8–9.
10 Metzner 1997, 8, 118, etc.

phors lack what I consider to be crucial in our context: being specific metaphors for the intentional and self-reflective quality of transformative experiences. I will discuss this lack in a moment, taking the butterfly metamorphosis as an example. Metzner's list of metaphors[11] includes processes from. . .

(1) dreaming to awakening,
(2) illusion to reality,
(3) captivity to liberation,
(4) fire to purification,
(5) darkness to light/enlightenment,
(6) fragmentation to wholeness, or: separation to oneness,[12]
(7) being on a journey to arriving at the destination (places of wisdom and power),
(8) exile to home, or: returning to the source,
(9) death to rebirth,
(10) seed to flowering/unfolding tree of life.[13]

The caterpillar to butterfly metamorphosis, not included as a category on its own in the list, serves also for Metzner as a prominent "symbol" or "analogy" of human transformation. For him, it seems to belong to the category of metaphors highlighting "captivity to liberation" and "darkness to light."[14] The general problem of animal imagery is, of course, its lack of human intentionality and human consciousness. This becomes immediately obvious reading Metzner's enactment of the metamorphic cycle. By analogy it should imply, he says, "that human beings are in a kind of larval stage and that a change is possible that would make us as different from the way we are now as butterflies are from caterpillars. The caterpillar lives in a different world from the butterfly. Can it know anything about its 'higher' world [. . .]? Can we humans know anything about the world of the ultrahuman, the transformed human? This question challenges us to explore and understand the sometimes tan-

11 Metzner 1980, 1997; cf. Rothberg 1997, 171–72, 200.

12 'From Fragment to wholeness' (William James) seems to be a subtle cognitive metaphor, combining "the whole" with "healing" (German heil/ganz, hale/whole), but what does it exactly mean referring to consciousness?

13 I should mention that this list details various variants. For example, imagery of transformative processes of "fire" includes other metaphors of purging, e.g., consuming the "false" self (Metzner 1997, 83). A variant is "calcination," the heating of a solid chemical compound in limited supply of oxygen, for the purpose of burning of liquid or volatile substances judged as "impurities." Another variant are the subtle energies in the body, for example, the uncontrolled, raging fires of Gopi Krishna (see below, and cf. Metzner 1997, 88).

14 Metzner 1986, 8–11; 1997, 9.

talizingly obscure symbols and metaphors. Perhaps those who have made it to 'butterfly' are trying to tell us 'larvae' something."[15]

Without question, a certain phase of—or the full—butterfly metamorphosis (. . . egg – caterpillar – chrysalis/larva – butterfly – egg . . .) figures from antiquity onwards as a very prominent example for human transformation. Extremely compelling in its imagery is the radical discontinuity between the different stages of metamorphic development, the unpredictable "quantum leaps" of its appearances from the caterpillar to the butterfly.[16]

However, it is not that easy to let go the essential ontological dimension and to transfer the imagery to human consciousness and its specific epistemic position. This can be sensed in Metzner's open questions above: What the larva may know of the butterfly's knowledge, and so forth. Surely, to understand the ontological transformation of the butterfly in terms of human consciousness would mean to read the metaphor as pertaining to an epistemic transformation. The attempt to insert an anthropomorphic intention into insect metamorphosis, present in Metzner, is elsewhere in full blossom. See, for example, William Denton's spiritualist manifest, *Is Spiritualism True?*[17] Here, two larvae in their cocoons debate on a future life. One larva says, it will certainly fly and flit from flower to flower in a future existence as a beautiful butterfly. The other larva, of course, does not believe it. But so it happens.[18] And John C. Lilly, who had a life-changing experience under LSD, refers in his autobiography to the latter with the butterfly imagery again.[19]

15 Metzner 1997, 14.

16 "Pupation, the weaving of the cocoon, followed by the sudden, wondrous emergence of the imago—the butterfly—from the chrysalis, offered, in the classical repertory of symbols, a correlative of hatching, with the significant difference that while hatching produces like from like, as does viviparous birthing, pupating produces something almost entirely unpredictable: the parent in this case does not ensure any recognizable feature in the offspring" (Warner 2002, 84–85).

17 Denton 1871.

18 Denton 1871, 23.

19 "The caterpillar forms the cocoon and then proceeds to total reorganization as a pupa. Only after a period of apparent disorganization and reformation can the butterfly form. After the butterfly is formed, it must rest and realize its being as a butterfly [. . .] and before it can fly, it must become dry, allow its wings to spread and form itself. The LSD session itself is the pupation, the period of organized disorganization, in which things are moving around with a fluidity and a plasticity that one normally does not experience [. . . O]ne can be uncertain as to how one will come out, still a caterpillar, or some monstrous combination of caterpillar and butterfly, or as a butterfly" (Lilly 1972, 14–15).

To conclude: the butterfly is most often likened with becoming immortal, or, to be more precise, of *becoming aware of one's hidden immortal nature*, and, read ontologically, for an unending process of reincarnation.[20]

But why is it exactly that the metamorphosis metaphor is less intuitive if taken to express *intentional* transformative experience? If we stick to the common view of minds of lower animals, it appears to be impossible to presuppose any intentional stance in the caterpillar or the larva to willingly become a butterfly. Neither will they know that out of their current appearance a butterfly shall evolve. Thus, I am inclined to argue that cognitive metaphors for "intentional" processes must necessarily imply human intentions and human self-conscious reflection. Of course, in a religious perspective, actors may presuppose experiences evolving from nature itself—a kind of intention and reflection *embedded* in the cosmos, for example, belonging to an *anima mundi*, expressing a world soul. Possibly, such views could be evidenced by a kind of pan-psychic co-evolution of the cosmos and humans. This would, however, express a robust metaphysical stance, and would pose other epistemic riddles not to be discussed here.

A plausible, and for the most uncontroversial assumption holds that to know of intentions, and to reflect on them, presupposes the human, first-person perspective. Only human individuals strive purposefully and deliberately for transformative experiences. Looking again at Metzner's list, human intentionality seems present in at least some categories: for example, to strive for an "awakening" from the sleep or dream includes, to a certain extent or in certain cases, intentionality. Other metaphors, like the "from seed to tree" imagery lacks intentionality in total, whereas other imagery (e.g., returning home, liberation from captivity) presuppose human bodily movement, or even social experiences—for example, of being "imprisoned." While these images are certainly helpful to understand the larger emotional and biographical framework of the reporting individual, they are as cognitive metaphors less precise and helpful in elucidating processes of *intentional* transformative experiences. In sum: ontological metaphors or symbols of transformation (such as the Catholic imagery of "transubstantiation"[21]) will not capture two very

20 See Schlieter 2018. The butterfly symbolizes "each man in his becoming a Logos or Deity," "the highest, most beautiful, and perfect condition of existence," as Wilson C. Wordsdell (1904, 502) says. Charles Johnston (1910, 217) holds: "Every object has characteristics belonging to its past, its present and its future [. . .]. The chrysalis has, as its past, the caterpillar; as its future, the butterfly. The man has, in his past, the animal; in his future, the angel," and he comments: "Perfectly concentrated Meditation, perfect insight into the chrysalis, reveals the caterpillar that it has been, the butterfly that it is destined to be." The "angelic butterfly" (*angelica farfalle*) is mentioned in Dante, *Purgatory* X: 121–26; cf. Warner 2002, 84.

21 According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, n 283: "*Transubstantiation* means the change of the whole substance of bread into the substance of the Body of Christ and of [. . .]

important traits of transformation—that these experiences are *intentionally willed*, and that their results will be *subjectively evaluated*. This, of course, does not mean that ontological metaphors are not used by practitioners, seekers, scholars, or philosophers. They are.[22] No problem, except for the more precise philosophical reconstruction of such experiences.

2 Transformative Choice

But how do individuals themselves conceptualize a transformation that yielded new spiritual insights, given that they most often already had a clear picture of what to achieve, and an intention and will to reach or realize this? And how do observing peers may ever be able to observe and evaluate if the transformative quality truly emerged from the said experience? How do practitioners searching for decisive spiritual experiences ensure that they will see the "searched-for" experience, *after* they underwent the respective transformation, as the same? Below, I will argue that the final evaluation of the accomplished transformative experience is still part of the experience because the indispensable basis for evaluation is the autobiographical narrative of the "epistemically" transformed individual. Unfolding the argument, I will first turn to Laurie Paul's philosophical analysis in her inspiring book discussing "transformative experience."

Paul's point of departure is how to decide in "deeply personal, centrally important, life-changing decisions"[23] if they imply making an experience that is not only life-changing but may entirely change the individual's point of view: a transformative choice.[24] The first, very helpful distinction of L.A. Paul's approach:

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wine into the substance of his Blood. This change is brought about in the eucharistic prayer through the efficacy of the word of Christ and by the action of the Holy Spirit. However, the outward characteristics of bread and wine, that is the 'eucharistic species,' remain unaltered" (https://www.vatican.va/archive/compendium_ccc/documents/archive_2005_compendium-ccc_en.html).

22 Practitioners using such examples may probably follow a different worldview, thinking, for example, of a cosmic dimension of a salvific nature. Moreover, the broader metaphors included in Metzner's list may underscore one of our final conclusions: that transformative experiences are best understood in the larger autobiographical framework of the narrating individual.

23 Paul 2014, 4.

24 I will only deal with such experiences here. Unfortunately, L.A. Paul subsumes under the category "experience" common sense perceptions as well as complex perceptions and processes of alterations in the self. This, for example, becomes obvious here: "Subjective values, grounded by what it is like to have lived experiences, are first-personal values that can range from the value of hearing beautiful music, to the value of tasting a ripe peach, to the value of adopting a new

Transformative experiences can be "personally transformative" or "epistemically transformative," or both. Personally transformative are those that may just add a new instance to principally known experiences, such as tasting a new flavor. Epistemically transformative are those decisions that lead to an experience which will change the undergoer in unknown ways.[25] Thus, "you cannot know what it is like to have that kind of experience until you've had it,"[26] and, moreover, one does not know how one's preferences will be changed undergoing the experience. Important aspects are, first, the "deep epistemic ignorance,"[27] which presupposes that one cannot base one's judgment on communicated experiences by others (examples[28] include religious conversion, or mothers having their first child). This ignorance implies that one cannot decide rationally in such cases, simply because the experience has to be made by oneself in order to assign preferences to its different possible outcomes.[29] This, however, does only work if one distrusts all experiential knowledge communicated by others—if one considers testimony by those who underwent the respective process and made 'their' experience as largely incommunicable or incommensurable: in short, as irrelevant.[30] This is a strong stance that I will discuss further down. It seems indisputable, though, that each individual has to undergo their own "life-changing" experiences, and that the outcome is—in many cases—to a considerable extent undetermined and uncertain, as is the case in LSD trips. Heaven or hell may loom. Nevertheless, not

sense of self as a consequence of a major life event" (2014, 13). Subjective values, she says, of such experiences include a "range of mental states, including beliefs, emotions, and desires" (12). This, indeed, points to a very broad and somewhat fuzzy concept of experience. Cf. the example of Mary seeing the color red for the first time—"experience" here basically a sense perception and the reflection on it (can the latter really be grasped by isolating her first perception of red as an "experience"?

25 "When a person has a new and different kind of experience, a kind of experience that teaches her something she could not have learned without having that kind of experience, she has an epistemic transformation" (Paul 2014, 10).

26 Paul 2014, 32.

27 Paul 2014, 83.

28 "Such experiences may include experiencing a horrific physical attack, gaining a new sensory ability, having a traumatic accident, undergoing major surgery, winning an Olympic gold medal, participating in a revolution, having a religious conversion, having a child, experiencing the death of a parent, making a major scientific discovery, or experiencing the death of a child" (Paul 2014, 16).

29 Paul argues that this epistemic ignorance may even return after a transformative experience: "just as knowledge about the experience of one individual can be inaccessible to another individual, what you can know about yourself at one time can be inaccessible to you at another time" (2014, 8).

30 Cf. Paul 2014, 88–89.

only in the case of psychedelic experiences one should consider Timothy Leary's "set and setting" to be relevant, i.e., that both the experiencer's mindset and the social-physical environment will determine the outcome.[31]

To discuss these complexities, it could be of help to draw on a well-known, often quoted example of a fully transformative experience in the spiritual realm, namely, the report of the awakening of *kuṇḍalinī* energy by Gopi Krishna (1903–1984, see Thaler in this volume). This experience, as described by Krishna, culminated in an 'out of body' experience, followed by months and years of burdensome and distressful aftereffects. Krishna would describe that extraordinary event as his activation of the so-called "coiled (serpent) power" (*kuṇḍalinī śakti*).[32] As such, it can illustrate the observation by H. Carel and I.J. Kidd,[33] that certain transformative experiences may result in epistemically positive but personally negative transformation.[34] However, while Krishna's report has often been quoted as an example of how an unconditional, un-intended eruption of raw *kuṇḍalinī*-power may almost destroy an individual, a close reading of Krishna's autobiographical account will come to a more nuanced picture in respect to its intentionality and destructiveness.

First, the experience has certainly been searched for, and was, thus fully intentional. It only came to the fore with a "non-intentional," extreme intensity. Krishna's account, however, reveals that it was the result of years of meditation practice, and extensive readings of Indian and Western books on Yoga, psychology, and Western occultism including Theosophy.

Second, the outcome of the *kuṇḍalinī*-awakening, while surely also exerting negative effects on Gopi Krishna's mental health and physical well-being—he saw himself suffering from hallucinations, describes phases of nervous breakdown and depression-like states[35]— is certainly seen as positive. Krishna describes its effects as a progressive expansion of his consciousness and of heightened perceptions,[36] as a process of rejuvenation,[37] as blissful, happy, "divine grace,"[38] and as a process of becoming aware of his genius consciousness resulting from *kuṇḍalinī*-power. The experience of this activation led to an epistemic transformation

31 Cf. Zinberg 1984.

32 Cf. Krishna 1970, 11–13.

33 Carel and Kidd 2020.

34 See Krishna 1970, 19.

35 See Krishna 1970, 50, 170, 175, 190.

36 "I was aware of was a progressively expanding field of consciousness and a slowly increasing brightness of the external and internal objects of perception [. . .], I was a different being inside, living in a lustrous world of brilliant colour of which others had no knowledge whatsoever" (Krishna 1970, 182–83; cf. 145–46, 185–86).

37 See Krishna 1970, 149.

38 Krishna 1970, 209.

and a personal one,[39] which can probably best be described as a cognitive enhancement of paranormal qualities. Krishna experiences an intensification of dream consciousness,[40] is able to visit the "supersensible realm,"[41] and learns new languages which are mediated into his brain by electric waves which on their part are again grounded, at least remotely, in *kuṇḍalinī*-consciousness.[42] This supernatural "reception of unknown languages"[43] is a very common trope of Western esotericism and Theosophy. In sum, while Krishna certainly includes vivid descriptions of the negative, strenuous, depressive aspects of his *kuṇḍalinī*-awakening, which is depicted as "awful," as physical and mental suffering, and so forth, the final outcome is clearly desirable.[44]

Thirdly, the probably most decisive personal insight that Krishna lets us know as emerging from the experience is the knowledge of being a more advanced individual, in terms of an evolutionary process of spiritual enhancement and advanced cerebral activities. It is an evolution of the brain itself—which is *kuṇḍalinī*-consciousness again, merely said in other words.[45] This process, he prophesizes, will soon palpably shape human evolution at large, possibly shaping exceptionally potent spiritual "superman."[46]

For understanding Krishna's intention to experience and develop *kuṇḍalinī*, it is essential to note that he shares with us that his father was deeply mystical. Already his father admired Yogic practitioners with occult powers,[47] and chose to leave the household for practicing Yoga in seclusion and reading extensively books on Yoga and occultism when his son was still young. Gopi Krishna obviously follows his father's lead when he tells his readers: the "fire of renunciation began to burn fiercely in me, seeking knowledge of an honourable way of escape [. . .] and quietude of a consecrated existence."[48] His mother, while also deeply

39 "But most alarming was the way in which my mind acted and behaved after the incident. I felt as if I were looking at the world from a higher elevation than that from which I saw it before [. . .] It seemed as if my cognitive faculty had undergone a transformation and that I had, as it were, mentally expanded. What was more startling and terrifying was the fact that [. . .] consciousness [. . .] expanded and contracted, regulated in a mysterious way by the radiant current that was flowing up from the lowest plexus" (Krishna 1970, 51).

40 See Krishna 1970, 146–47.

41 Krishna 1970, 213.

42 See Krishna 1970, 212–13.

43 Krishna 1970, 228.

44 See Krishna 1970, 170–75, 190.

45 See Krishna 1970, 226, 214, 245–49.

46 See the most relevant pages in chapter 19 (Krishna 1970, 248–49).

47 See Krishna 1970, 17–20.

48 Krishna 1970, 20.

spiritual, was of a different kind, showing devotional faith in gods and miracles.[49] To sum up the observations on Gopi Krishna's transformative experience: His mind-set was from early on, by way his family socialization and through extensive readings of Western esotericism and Indian esoteric Yoga, soaked by one desire: to have such experiences himself. It clearly was an intentional endeavor, and the disturbing intensity of the "awakening" not fully negative, that is, not devastating, but much more a narrative illustration of the overwhelming—and in its superior handling: positive—power of *kuṇḍalinī*.

As such, it seems less appropriate to ask if this experience happened as described, or how this experience may correlate to a somehow objectifiable transformative "spiritual energy" in humans or humankind. Obviously, it is almost impossible to disentangle the experience (as an autobiographical narrative) from this biographical background.

In addition, the die-hard distrust in other people's reporting of transformative experiences is less convincing in a second, "Wittgensteinian" regard. Personal transformative experiences are not only subjective. They are also affected by language, including descriptions of transformative experiences by relevant others—living teachers as well as literature (as seen in the case just discussed). Not to include these earlier reports by others as an influential factor seems to rest on the presupposition that the individual will search and experience transformation only in "pure" or "unmediated experiences"—experiences not affected by earlier reports (or, more generally, by language). Particularly, it seems to hinge on the idea that expectations raised through other 'transformative experiencer's testimony' have no significant impact. Certainly, one does not know for sure in which way one will evolve from transformative experiences—even if others largely convene that there is a certain usual outcome, e.g., from using psychedelic drugs. But it seems important to me to emphasize that other person's testimony will nevertheless contribute (a) to one's *intention to search* a certain transformative experience, (b) to the *transformative experience proper*, and (c) the *appraisal and evaluation* of the transformation. This does not mean that testimonies are reliable guidelines, but that we live in a universe of testimonies of transformative experiences which raise concrete expectations, and which influence our own post-transformative self-evaluation. Communicated experience, i.e., third-person testimonies, will *afford* certain experiences and their interpretation, while it will make other experiences less likely.

49 "I was brought up in a strictly religious atmosphere by my mother, whose faith rested unshakably on each of the innumerable gods and goddesses in her crowded pantheon" (Krishna 1970, 32).

L.A. Paul, in her concluding thoughts on transformative choice, recommends remaining open to epistemic transformative experiences. One should allow for "revelation," that is, stay open for having new experiences for their own sake.[50] A "revelation" in this meaning, one should add, has no obvious religious connotation. In my understanding, it conforms to an ideal of a continuous self-realization,[51] including an appeal to allow for a different future. This is in broad strokes the major trajectory of L.A. Paul's philosophical analysis. I will now return to the question of cognitive metaphors for transformative experiences. The guiding cognitive imagery the book uses is the hypothetical choice to become a vampire. An analysis of this imagery may help us not only to distinguish between transformative experience and the experience of being transformed, but also, to characterize an important trait of transformative experiences in the spiritual realm. L.A. Paul starts her thought experiment with the following words:

> Imagine that you have the chance to become a vampire. With one [. . .] bite, you'll be permanently transformed into an elegant and fabulous creature of the night. As a member of the undead, your life will be completely different. You'll experience a range of intense, revelatory new sense experiences, you'll gain immortal strength, speed and power.[52]

Yet, only a vampire knows what it is like to be a vampire. One may think here of Nagel's not only phenotypically cognate example of the impossibility to know what it's like to be a bat.[53] Let us assume, she says, that the decision of becoming a vampire is irreversible, and that your friends, formerly humans and now vampires, tell you that it is amazing and fantastic. They would never opt to return—even if they could. Would you do it? This highlights once again the epistemic problem: "they aren't human any more, so their preferences are the ones vampires have, not the ones humans have."[54] This far, the vampire example illus-

50 "The best response to this situation is to choose based on whether we want to discover who we'll become" (Paul 2014, 4). One could try, L.A. Paul argues, to move from "a consideration of outcomes such as *what it will be like to be a vampire*" to evaluating "outcomes such as *discovering what it is like to be a vampire* versus *not discovering what it is like to be a vampire*," that is, to reframe the choice of whether "to have the experience for its own sake" (112). But the value "for its own sake" (for the sake of discovery of the radically new), she says, could again look different after the experience (116). Yes, indeed! As argued, the discover being a vampire (by affirming, and not avoiding the choice) might not be the best illustration for this "revelatory" quality, because it is, as argued above, the end of any further "revelation."

51 This involves options that "function as crossroads in your path towards self-realization" (Paul 2014, 17).

52 Paul 2014, 1.

53 Nagel 1974.

54 Paul 2014, 2.

trates very nicely the situation of the great "life choices." Certainly, it appears much more intuitive for us to imagine us as vampires—in contrast to caterpillars and butterflies who lack human intentionality altogether. Interestingly, however, L.A. Paul says that you may not know how it is like to be a vampire, because the vampire will evaluate his existence with his vampire preferences. To assume that we may not evaluate a vampire's existence on the basis of the vampire's evaluation(s)—if they are able to talk in our language at all—does not convince. As a philosophical argument, it seems somewhat close to solipsism. If you would like to know what the vampire's "life" is like: go, ask! Let them describe extensively their existence. If the language of the vampire will be the human language, it will be a language expressing emotions, preferences, evaluations, all of which we will understand. The vampire will express "experiences"—given he is still able to have experiences, and, if it is able to remember its pre-transformative, human state, it will at least be able to describe the general difference between the pre- and post-transformative existence.

The example of the vampire, however, implies one aspect that I would like to discuss more thoroughly. L.A. Paul argues that even if "life choices don't usually involve the possibility of becoming an *immortal being*, they are fundamentally similar in a different way."[55] But what does it mean that the vampire is immortal? In contrast to other traits of being a vampire, significant as they are: sucking blood, living in night-time, being able to fly, and so on, the trait of being "undead" or immortal seems to me in fact to be a quality of a different kind. "Being immortal" is one of the central elements which, on the one hand, let appear the existence of a vampire desirable, while, at the same time, it is probably the most central obstacle to deciding *rationally* whether or not to become a vampire.[56] Becoming immortal is the most epistemically transformative element: it is also in several respect the last existential decision the individual makes. To become immortal means to make the 'life-transforming' decision par excellence, a decision that pushes all other future decisions in a second rank. Nothing will ever be life-threatening, and nothing can ever be final. Being immortal, I hold, the vampire will be unable to make any further epistemically transformative experience. If the vampire *knows* (self-reflective) of being immortal, it reaches a state in which no further experience can ever undermine a fundamental security of "being." No new experience will ever again uncover precarious dimensions of existence. Suffering the loss of beloved, for example, will also be fundamentally changed: Ei-

55 Paul 2014, 2; emphasis added.

56 The Vampire case is certainly more than an illustration (see Paul 2014, 42–43, 46, 47, 49, 50).

ther the beloved are themselves eternal, too,[57] or one lives with an open future of infinite new relationships. I assume that certainly in first case, and most likely also in the second case the existential meaning of loss will vanish. If this is plausible, we could reframe the question like this:

– The transformative choice of becoming a vampire consists in the choice to have a final transformative experience that will at once end the future possibility for transformative experiences.

This is life-changing in the most radical sense because it will put an end to the *human* condition of life. Becoming immortal would render the idea of "life choices" both useless and meaningless. Thus, we can say becoming a vampire is a truly epistemically transformative experience, because it implies that after the transformative experience awaits a state of being permanently transformed[58] without ever repeating a transformative experience of sorts. As such, it seems comparable to a very central Christian idea: paradise lost. Indeed, we can trace fundamental elements of such a risky transformative experience to a classical Christian theme, namely, tasting the forbidden transformative fruit in paradise. I may shortly highlight how the motif has been taken up by John Milton in "Paradise Lost,"[59] explicitly naming it an "experience." Here, the serpent convinces Eve that tasting the fruit will augment her "inward powers," and will grant higher knowledge. Tasting the fruit, so the serpent suggests, Eve will enjoy a transformation: Having a more "capacious" mind and power of reason, and discerning the workings of the universe, otherwise visible only in heaven. So, she eats the fruit, and persuades Adam to join her with words again praising the effects of her own experience: "This tree is not as we are told, a tree / Of danger tasted, nor to evil unknown / Opening the way, but of divine effect / To open eyes, and make them gods who taste."[60] But, of course, the effects are known, and fatal: paradise lost. Interestingly, Milton names the transformation an "experience."[61] "On my experience," he has Eve say to Adam, "freely taste, / And fear of death deliver to the winds."[62] We can easily see that here also there is only one fundamental transformative experience, and Eve and Adam will never return to her pre-transformed garden.

57 See Jim Jarmush's movie on a vampire couple, *Only Lovers Left Alive*, Great Britain, Germany 2013 (Pandora Film).

58 The state of being permanently transformed implies, of course, a long-term evaluation—combining judgments immediately after the experience, sometime later, and much later.

59 Milton (1667) 2005.

60 Milton (1667) 2005, 9. 863–66.

61 Milton (1667) 2005, 9.807.

62 Milton (1667) 2005, 9.988–89.

But what does this discussion on vampires yield for the study of intentional transformative experiences in the field of religious and spiritual practices?[63] Sure, the vampire does not figure prominently in the world's major religious traditions. Nevertheless, I consider the transformative choice of "becoming a vampire" to be a perfect metaphor for illustrating the most important message of transformative experiences sought after in the spiritual field: The overwhelming majority of spiritual practitioners search for one specific certainty, namely, of becoming aware of their immortal nature—whether this is conceptualized as unlimited consciousness, as the original self, or an eternal soul. A fully transformative, spiritual experience will arguably always imply a kind of knowledge of the experiencer's own infinite nature.[64] This is, as I argued elsewhere, the transformative dimension of many life-changing "near-death experiences."[65] Even if it is only an ephemeral moment of an "out of body experience," in which the individual (if convinced that the out-of-body perspective is made by a *disembodied* observer) may experience the reality of a non-corporeal consciousness. If not judged to be an illusion, it is a view from nowhere: disembodied consciousness, itself no longer bound to matter that will eventually dissolve. Disembodied consciousness should no longer transform. If disembodied, it should not die. Regarding near-death visions, therefore, it does not matter if the individual includes traditional religious imagery in their near-death vision or not: The medium (that there *are* afterlife insights at all) is the message. Given the hypothesis is plausible that a life-changing religious or spiritual transformative experience will usually, while made, imply an insight into how (suffering from) finitude can be overcome, it should add evidence to the claim by providing examples from religious discourse and religious actors.

To repeat my hypothesis: Searching for a truly life-changing and epistemically transformative experience will mean in the religious field to gain an insight that uncovers human finitude to be unreal, and an illusionary perception. One could probably object here and argue that this sense of a "truly life-changing experience" skips the possibility of somewhat less big, but still life-changing, religious experiences. How about experiences of "great transcendence" (Alfred Schütz, Thomas Luck-

63 L.A. Paul herself mentions "transformative religious belief" (see Paul 2014, 104, referring to an unpublished paper) but does not discuss it more thoroughly.

64 "You know that undergoing the experience will change what it is like for you to live your life, and perhaps even change what it is like to be you, deeply and fundamentally" (Paul 2014, 3) – Yes, and more, in the case of the vampire, who does no longer know what life is, because life has lost its opposite: death. Again, we encounter very different meanings of "experience" here: the experience of change; the experience of being changed, and of being permanently changed.

65 Schlieter 2018.

mann) which are beyond the everyday world, and life-changing, but not exclusively made in a religious framework: for example, an encounter with some sort of truth (for example, a person's cognitive experience of having understood for the first time a deep emotion such as empathy), or experiences in nature?[66] While there are certainly such intermediate, secular "life-transforming" experiences, I will define as truly life-changing experiences only those which change substantially and irreversibly the attitude towards the meaning of individual's life. These perceptions are, *per definitionem*, religious. Religious perceptions can be defined as those that transform and transcend exactly these perceptions of finite life: the loss of a beloved, contingency and uncertainty in every other respect, or the feeling of being a meaningless fragment. This attitude is reflected in what Niklas Luhmann or Hermann Lübbe have called the "contingency reduction" of religion.[67] Religion is a coping strategy, providing formula to overcome contingency. I will take Buddhism as an example here. Describing his achievement, the liberation found in his awakening, the Buddha is said to have taught the following in a very prominent place, his first sermon "Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma" (*Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta*): "Listen! Immortality is found" (Pali: *amatam adhigatam*, Vin I.9,15ff.).[68] As the famous "four noble truth," communicated for the first time in exactly this Sutta, he describes his teaching and practice to be the most efficient means against all forms of "suffering" arising from human finitude: aging, illness, death; union with what is displeasing; separation from what is pleasing, and so forth. Elsewhere, he told his followers how he achieved the transformative experience of awakening, and described "the noble search" for this transformative experience with the following words: "There is the case where a person, himself being subject to aging . . . illness. . . death. . . sorrow. . . defilement [. . .], seeks the aging-less, illness-less, deathless, sorrow-less, undefiled, unexcelled rest from the yoke: Unbinding. This is the noble search.[69]

And it is exactly this, this awakening (*bodhi*)—the meditative practice under the tree of awakening— which he is said to consider as the intentional transformative experience in which he gained exactly these insights (M I. 160ff.). These depictions harmonize with the concept of *nirvāṇa*, the state of ultimate and infinite peace. It will not be necessary to go into detail here, but this is one major trait of Buddhist practice that has been from the beginning defined as overcoming precarious life by achieving a state (of mind) that includes eternal peace. The Buddha

66 See Thurfjell 2019.

67 Cf. Luhmann 1989, 349–51; see also Hägglund 2019.

68 Cf. Vetter 1988, 8.

69 MN 26; M I.160 ff. Ariyapariyesana Sutta ("The Noble Search"). Translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu 2004. http://www.accesstoinsight.org./tipitaka/mn/mn.026.than.html.

says: Immortality, or, more precisely, the deathless, the "last birth" state,[70] is found. Becoming the Buddha by his "awakening" (*bodhi*), the Buddha obviously narrates to not only being personally transformed, but also epistemically: In the experience, he is able to see himself in earlier births and existences, he understands the conditionality of karma, and he understands himself to be the Buddha—all elements of his narrative that demonstrate his deep epistemic transformation.

But again, one could object and argue that the life-changing experience is exactly the opposite of what has been stated above. Instead of an insight that uncovers human finitude to be unreal (as argued above) it could, on the contrary, be an insight that uncovers human finitude to be real. Hence, it would be an insight that results in embracing finitude, an insight that renders each moment precious.[71] I will not deny that practitioners of various religio-philosophical traditions such as, for example, strands of Indian, Tibetan, or East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism seek to realize an insight that accepts finitude, an insight into selflessness and emptiness, which entails to go beyond the distinction of finite/infinite. This philosophical Buddhist understanding, nevertheless, still includes an emphatic inclusion of the "non-finite." Furthermore, if it fully breaks with any inspiration of a "beyond," and only embraces the finite without any reference to nirvana, Buddhahood, or else, one could also define this attitude as no longer located within the religious field. Instead, it reflects a philosophical attitude springing forth from the nourishing ground of a religious tradition.

The primary religious goal to transform into someone who knows that finitude is transcended, that anxiety of non-being besieged, and that mortality is no longer a pressing existential issue, is also an effect of other major tradition's transformative experiences. Next to Buddhism, one should think of the Hindu traditions here, that is, the idea of the "released" (*jivanmukta*, the completely free, "liberated in life"), who now know their "true self." Equally, one could think of Christian or Muslim conversion experiences. Although I may not elaborate here on further examples, I may mention that it is in perfect harmony with attempts to describe human intentional efforts to become aware of one's immortal soul,[72] even if transformative experiences are sometimes less valued in theological discourse. Some Christian, Jewish, and Muslim theologians seem to share a certain reservation against intentional efforts to *train* or *experiment* with transformative

70 See A I 259, "But when I comprehended, as it really is, the satisfaction of the world as satisfaction, the misery as misery, and the escape therefrom as escape, then I understood perfectly and accepted full Buddha-status, and the knowledge and vision arose in me: sure is the release of my mind: this is my last birth" (quoted in Johansson 1969, 21).

71 My thanks go to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this possibility.

72 e.g., William James—see his *Human Immortality*, 1898.

experiences, and may stress instead the importance of devotion, correct ritual behavior, and especially, unconditional belief in the grace of God, and so forth—see, again exemplary, Paul Tillich.[73]

3 Narrating Transformative Experience – Autobiographies of the Transformed Self

Finally, I shall discuss how transformative experiences are depicted from the perspective of the "permanently transformed," and what this may teach us for the systematic study of religious experiences, or, experiences deemed "*religious*." I may share a general observation first: Many practitioners and scholars of religion deeply cherish the idea of a sudden enlightenment. *Intentional* transformative experiences, if they come as a result a long-term *search* and a *continuous training*, are much less appealing. Why is this so? I think there is first a rather obvious moment: One generally shies away from arduous labor if the outcome is unclear. It seems that practitioners as well as seekers like to narrate a *sudden* change, because being *unexpected* entails full authenticity. To be suddenly overpowered by a "struck-by-a-lightning" experience is intensifying the evidence, if not, a narrative evidence-mechanism: A sudden awakening or enlightenment, or being unexpectedly liberated from prison, and so forth—just note again Metzner's list of transformative metaphors above. All this will discursively express that the whole experience was *real*. It did not happen as a lukewarm, half-imagined fulfilment of long-cherished hopes. Yet, a closer look at autobiographical depictions of such life-changing experiences uncovers a truly amazing fact: Very often, the post-ecstatic, transformed individual explains that in their life prior to the life-changing experience, they already somehow knew what to search for.

I will only shortly summarize this argument on the narrative autobiographical frame of "religious experience" here, that I developed elsewhere.[74] I will again take the historical Buddha as an example, but the structure can be shown from sixteenth and seventeenth century Protestant conversion narratives up to experiences of "enlightenment" in the most recent esoteric milieu.

In the autobiographical sources in which the Buddha is depicted to narrate his spiritual search, he first speaks of unsuccessful attempts: his meditation practice under guidance of his two Yogic teachers, which did not avail the bliss and

73 Tillich 1957, 36.
74 Cf. Schlieter 2023.

awareness of full liberation. Neither were his radical ascetic practices hailed with salvific results. After almost starving himself to death, the Buddha narrates his followers that he finally thought to himself:

> 'And whatever recluses and brahmins at present experience painful, racking, piercing feelings due to exertion, this is the utmost, there is none beyond this. But by this racking practice of austerities I have not attained any superhuman states, any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones. Could there be another path to awakening? (*Siyā nu kho añño maggo bodhāyā*)? 'I considered: 'I recall that when my father the Sakyan was occupied, while I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree, quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, I entered upon and abided in the first *jhāna* [meditative state]. Could that be the path to awakening?' Then, following on that memory, came the realization: 'That is the path to awakening.'[75]

In other words, the Buddha is said to already know what to find! He knew it all the time. Let me remark that this blissful state is not only the entrance gate of his fully intentional transformative experience: the memory of this initial state of him being a teenager is *invoked* in order to serve as an additional criterion for the *authenticity and agency of the way to awakening*—thus, it is part of the *real* awakening. Surely, in how far the source above articulates the *ipsissima vox* of the Buddha must remain an open question, given the long oral transmission of the Buddha's speeches. However, even if it is largely a narrative of intentional transformative experiences as construed by his followers, it is still significant.

What do we do with these observations on "life-changing transformative experiences," and what will follow for the study of religious experience? First, intentional transformative experiences have to be studied in the autobiographical framework. Being "transformative," they presuppose a retrospective view on a process which makes it less appropriate to construe those experiences as isolated events, as for example, in the "event cognition" paradigm of Egil Asprem and Ann Taves.[76] Transformative experiences can rarely be understood without a view of what the individual intentionally searched for—and, often, already set on the path in their youth.

See this excerpt from Leo Tolstoy, *My Confession* (*Ispoved*, 1882):

> I remember one day in early spring when I was alone in the forest listening to the sounds of the woods. I [. . .] thought about the one thing that had constantly occupied me for the last three years. Again I was searching for God. [. . .] 'Live, seeking God, for there can be no life without God.' And more powerfully than ever a light shone within me and all around me,

75 Mahāsaccaka Sutta, MN 36; M I.246; translation by Bodhi 1995, 340, with small terminological adaptations.

76 Asprem and Taves 2017.

> and this light has not abandoned me since. Thus I was saved from suicide. When and how this transformation within me was accomplished, I could not say. Just as the life force within me was gradually and imperceptibly destroyed, [. . .] so too did this life force return to me gradually and imperceptibly. And the strange thing is that the life force which returned to me was not new but very old; it was the same force that had guided me during the early periods of my life. In essence I returned to the first things, to the things of childhood and youth. I returned to a faith in that will which gave birth to me.[77]

In their recent compendium on religious experience, Paul K. Moser and Chad Meister select the respective passage from Tolstoy's autobiographical account to show how "religious experience" culminates in a life-changing meaningfulness, which, due to its transformative qualities, alters the way individuals see their earlier lives. In this trajectory, they comment: "Something happened, or was presented, to Tolstoy in his experience, or qualitative awareness, and this was not just a belief, hypothesis, or theory. He directly experienced new meaning for his life."[78]

From the importance of the autobiographical background, which embeds the transformative, cutting-edge experience into a complex setting of other cognate, although not similarly intense, experiences, follows an interest in exactly those earlier other experiences, which allow to see the whole life of the "experiencers" as a series of more or less transformative experiences, which finally reintroduce the Shakespearean, pre-Empiricist-individualist semantics of "experience": Experience, Anna Wierzbicka has shown in her impressive work,[79] how the modern usage of the term "experience" changed significantly from a model of experience as positive, accumulated objective knowledge to a sensory-based model of subjective, replicable experience(s)—now a count noun. In regard to a more accurate description of what one shall depict as "life-changing experiences," I consider it relevant to revive the "Shakespearean" view of experience as accumulated knowledge by either a doer or an undergoer who has collected his experiential knowledge with difficulties, laborious repetition, and over many years. Even if it goes against the grain of the current use of "religious experience" (presupposing the empiricist preference of sense-perception), it seems much more accurate to me to construe "religious experience" as deeply dependent on a *religious individual's biography*. Even if individuals from the late eighteenth century onwards spoke of *experiments* with transformative experiences, one can still become aware how their scientific rhetoric emerged from a religious endeavor (and an ontological view of experiments that simply show *how*

77 Tolstoy 1882; 1920, 75.
78 Tolstoy 2020, 2; emphasis in original.
79 Wierzbicka 2010; cf. Schlieter 2023, 155–57.

nature is).[80] Sure, to include earlier and not fully life-changing experiences in what counts as "religious experiences" may lead us to a view of religious experiences as having a less dramatic outcome for the experiencing individual. If, however, one defines as religious "*any ideal of being absolved from the pain of loss*,"[81] the Vampire, and any other human being immortalized, could indeed count as living up to a religious ideal. But as we can see from the Buddha's example, it seems much better to already know what one is looking for. In the case of the missionary Vampire, one has only a third-person testimony at hand.

There is no experimental option to be a Vampire for a limited period. Hence, if you meet a benevolent Vampire on your way praising its transformed existence, think twice before letting it bite you.

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80 Cf., for example, the in this case much more radical idea of an open experiment in Nietzsche, starting, interestingly, with the title "mortal souls": Nietzsche's "Experimental-Philosophie" (NL 1888 16[32], Fröhliche Wissenschaft, KSA 13, 492): due to the fact, that the belief in an immortal soul is lost— "mortal souls" (Sterbliche Seelen), as the title of the aphorism has it, and which includes the loss of belief in possible eternal punishment, it is now allowed to experiment with oneself (being free to do so, because it no longer counts as madness, or as playing with heaven and hell (see KSA 3, 294).

81 Hägglund 2019, 74.

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